

What are professional learning communities?

The very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student. When a school or district functions as a PLC, educators within the organization embrace high levels of learning for all students as both the reason the organization exists and the fundamental responsibility of those who work within it.

Definition

Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning outcomes for all students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators.

Components of PLCs

- Structures created to ensure staff members engage in job-embedded learning as part of their routine work practices
- Collaborative teams where teachers work together interdependently in order to impact their classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school
- Engage in collective inquiry into both best practices in teaching and best practices in learning – inquire about their current reality and the levels of achievement for their students – shared knowledge on the best way to achieve goals
- Action orientated – move quickly to turn aspirations into action and visions into reality
 - Have a commitment to continuous improvement – the goal is not simply to learn a new strategy, but instead to create conditions for perpetual learning.
- Focus on results – develop and pursue measurable improvement goals that are aligned to school and district goals for learning

Creating Professional Learning Communities

Leaders must overcome the impulse, in building PLCs, to ‘accept the system as it is and lead it’. Instead they must:

- *Help people break free of the thicket of precedent, the tangle of unquestioned assumptions, and the trap of comfortable complacency.*
- *Commit to creating the conditions in which those educators can continue to grow and learn as professionals.*

“If leaders allow participation in PLC processes to be optional, they doom the initiative to failure. Piloting a program with interested staff can be a valuable way to build shared knowledge regarding its effectiveness, but substantive change that transforms a culture will ultimately require more than an invitation. The challenging of deep assumptions inherent in changing the culture of a school or district requires



leaders to assert their influence, to get and hold people's attention. In short, leaders must be willing to lead".

DeFour et al are clear they what they advocate is not a program BUT rather an *on-going, never-ending* process specifically designed to change the very culture of schools and districts.

Advice for leading a PLC

- Link the change initiatives to current practices and assumptions where possible
- Focus first on the 'why' of change, then focus on the 'how'
- Align actions with words
- Be flexible in implementation but firm on the essence of the initiative
- Build a guiding coalition and move forward without unanimity
- Expect to make mistakes and learn from them
- Learn by doing
- Keep hope alive
- Passion and persistence

References

DuFour, Richard, DuFour, Rebecca, Eaker, Robert and Many, Thomas, Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional learning Communities at Work (2009)

